

Targeted Food Marketing to Black and Hispanic Consumers: The Tobacco Playbook

 See also Nguyen et al., p. 329.

Many US food companies have identified Black and Hispanic consumers as a significant business growth opportunity.¹ In 2017, these companies spent more than \$1 billion to advertise on Spanish language-targeted and Black-targeted television, more than 80% promoting fast food, sugar-sweetened beverages, candy, and unhealthy snack brands. Black children and adolescents saw approximately twice as many television food advertisements compared with their White peers, and these disparities have increased. Unhealthy food marketing and access to unhealthy food are also greater in low-income communities of color.^{2,3} Furthermore, these same unhealthy food brands often target advertising and sponsorships to “multicultural” youths through celebrity endorsements, music and sporting event sponsorships, scholarships, and other corporate social responsibility initiatives.^{1,4}

Targeted marketing is not problematic on its own.^{3,5} Marketing to racial/ethnic minority consumers recognizes the importance of populations previously excluded by most traditional marketers. By signaling that a brand values Black and Hispanic consumers and that its products are for “someone like me,” targeted marketing is highly effective. This marketing also often provides much-needed resources to local communities and targeted media properties.

However, this onslaught of unhealthy food marketing represents an overwhelming obstacle to successful public health efforts to address the epidemic of diet-related disease, including obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, disproportionately affecting communities of color.²

As Nguyen et al. (p. 329) clearly show in this issue of *AJPH*, targeting food marketing to racial/ethnic minority consumers represents a deliberate strategy designed to foster goodwill in their communities. This strategy borrows heavily from the tobacco marketing playbook and raises ethical and public health concerns.

THE TOBACCO PLAYBOOK

By analyzing industry documents publicly available through the University of California San Francisco Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library, Nguyen et al. raised the curtain on the motivations and methods for targeted food marketing strategies. They describe how Philip Morris Corporation transferred its expertise in “ethnic” marketing of cigarettes (aimed at Black and Hispanic consumers) to create a fully integrated ethnic marketing program at Kraft General Foods (KGF), following acquisition of the two companies. KGF identified a subset of products that disproportionately

appealed to Black and Hispanic consumers, including sugar-sweetened beverages (Kool-Aid and Tang) and dry package dinners (e.g., macaroni and cheese), and created a “fully integrated” ethnic marketing program around these brands.

Industry documents describing corporate marketing strategies are proprietary and rarely available for public scrutiny. Therefore, this analysis provides a rare and enlightening depiction of the purpose for KGF’s ethnic marketing strategy. The documents describe marketing promotions designed to increase profitability through increased brand visibility and sales from Black and Hispanic consumers, as well as reduced costs through synergies between the company’s operating units (food, beer, and tobacco) engaged in ethnic marketing.

The documents also describe the importance of ethnic marketing to create a positive corporate image (i.e., “goodwill”) within Black and Hispanic communities. Notably, this recognition of benefits from ethnic marketing was not evident before the Philip Morris Corporation merger, with General Foods describing its purchase of ethnic media as “affirmative action” and

targeting individual consumer segments as an “inconvenience.” The process that KGF used to select brands for ethnic marketing is also illuminating, including its use of data to identify consumer segments with already high per-capita consumption of the product and market research perpetuating negative stereotypes. For example, General Foods proposed targeting Tang to Hispanic households because of their disproportionate consumption, poor education, responsiveness to product displays, and “less concern about salt, sugar or calorie levels.”

The analysis also describes the full range of techniques incorporated into KGF’s integrated ethnic marketing program. Ethnic marketing consisted of advertising in Hispanic and Black media, with public pledges to support ethnic-targeted media (traditionally less attractive to advertisers). Ethnic event marketing sponsorships incorporated partnerships with target organizations, on-site merchandising, media support, comarketing in retail locations, and public relations. Nguyen et al. document more than 200 KGF-sponsored ethnic events from 1989 to 1999, including community-based cultural events, sporting events, and conferences. Events also included partnerships with Black and Hispanic leadership organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Council of La Raza, and

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League of United Latin American Citizens.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

The ethnic marketing strategies described by Nguyen et al. refer to just one food company and describe marketing that occurred from 1984 to 2004. However, major food companies, including PepsiCo, Mars, and Domino's Pizza, continue to use these same strategies to target Black and Hispanic consumers.² Targeted food marketing continues to create goodwill in these communities, while almost exclusively promoting harmful products detrimental to the health of the community members they claim to support.³⁻⁵

As public health advocates engage with food companies to address childhood obesity, food insecurity, and other public health challenges, they should keep in mind some key learnings from this analysis of industry documents. First, corporate social responsibility initiatives by food companies represent an attempt to purchase goodwill for their brands; brands whose consumption would actually benefit the community do not need to purchase this support. Rather, sponsored initiatives in under-resourced communities (including playgrounds, scholarships,

and cultural events) almost exclusively promote brands that otherwise may not be welcomed, including tobacco 40 years ago and sugar-sweetened beverages and fast food today.^{2,3}

The resources that tobacco, and now food, companies invest in Black and Hispanic communities and leadership organizations also represent a strategy to enlist these organizations to oppose public health initiatives intended to address the issues that their products have created. As Nguyen et al. note, tobacco companies used corporate social responsibility to enlist minority allies to fight tobacco regulations, whereas today beverage companies fund minority organizations who have coordinated with the American Beverage Association to fight soda taxes.

Finally, corporate profit motives determine the brands that companies choose to target to Black and Hispanic consumers. Where public health experts see populations with overconsumption of sugar, fat, sodium, and calories, food companies see a targeting opportunity for sugar-sweetened beverages, chips, and fast-food brands. Where public health sees a need to increase plain water and healthy food consumption, food companies see a poor return on investment in marketing these healthier products. Targeted marketing thus perpetuates stereotypes about what

certain populations will eat, which leads to a vicious cycle of marketing that exacerbates health disparities.

In summary, Nguyen et al. describe how food companies have borrowed from the tobacco playbook to develop integrated ethnic marketing programs targeted to Black and Hispanic consumers. Public health advocates can also borrow from successful anti-tobacco public health initiatives to address unhealthy food marketing targeted to communities of color.³⁻⁶ First, they must recognize that food companies cannot voluntarily reduce marketing of highly profitable but unhealthy products because of their obligations to shareholders; public policies such as sugar-sweetened beverage taxes and community-level regulation of unhealthy food marketing are necessary. Advocates also should focus on unhealthy food marketing as a social justice issue and support grassroots action in communities that experience its most negative effects. Publication of industry documents, such as those analyzed in Nguyen et al., will help increase understanding of questionable industry motives. Information from the successful "truth" anti-tobacco campaign strategy could be used to support counter-marketing campaigns to highlight the injustice of targeted marketing to Black and Hispanic

communities for products that contribute to long-term negative effects on their health.⁶ **AJPH**

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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